Highways of the Skies

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Looking into the future of aviation in India and across the globe, imagine highways in the skies, with airplanes traveling in straight "lanes" from one point to the other, rather than veering off to follow the beacons that have guided most of the world's civil aircraft for the past 40 years. Those trips could take less time and less fuel. Imagine that the pilots and air traffic controllers could be sure, with much more precision, of an airplane's exact location. The distance between aircraft could then be reduced, no more mile-or-more rule, and therefore more aircraft could fly these more direct routes.

Imagine this more precise navigation system could mark out a route that allows the aircraft to fly closer to obstacles and not consume time and fuel to veer around. Imagine that during bad weather, because the pilots know more precisely where they are, planes may be able to fly, take off and land under conditions they may not be able to now.

Well, this is a vision that has much of the Indian aviation industry excited, more excited than any group to which the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration and the International Civil Aviation Organization have made their presentation on this new thing called Performance Based Navigation. It's already been implemented in some airplanes and airports in the United States, where 100 new routes and procedures will be published this year. "They've resulted in greater precision, more flexibility and improved access at major airports, including Dallas Fort-Worth [Texas], Palm Springs [California], Washington, D.C. and the busiest of them all, Atlanta [Georgia]," FAA Administrator Marion Blakey said during her visit to New Delhi in April.

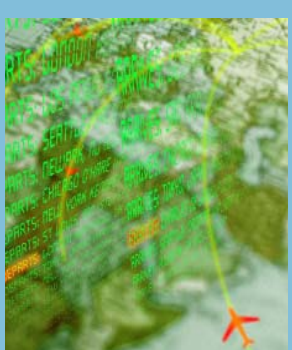
"The government of India has indicated to us that they were very interested in this technology," says Randall S. Fiertz, senior Federal Aviation Administration representative for South Asia. Just after the first U.S.-India Aviation Partnership Summit in April, a team of FAA experts held two days of discussions with every major player in Indian aviation.

"The idea was to show them our experience, how we went about developing a route map for this in the United States, what some of our problems have been and how we resolved them, what are the pluses and minuses of doing this and then to initiate a discussion about whether this is something they want to pursue," says Fiertz. "There was an overwhelmingly positive response from the Indian stakeholders. We were surprised at how ready they were. This team from FAA had never seen such an enthusiastic response before. This has set the stage now for the Indian government to work with their stakeholders in pursuing this. The next big thing is a workshop in September."

The seminars and workshops have been held around the world at regional offices of the International Civil Aviation Organization, and the nearest one is Bangkok, Thailand. "But we helped convince them to come to New Delhi," says Fiertz. "So far, India is the only country they are coming to that's not a regional office."

This "highways in the sky" vision is still years away. The technology is here, but airport traffic controllers and pilots must be trained, regulations must be written, routes must be designated.

But there is good reason why Indian stakeholders were so enthusiastic about Performance Based Navigation. Because India's growing air fleet is so new, it is much easier to have this new navigational system installed in the airplanes before they are delivered. India is actually in a better position than other countries, including the United States, which must refit planes to accommodate it. —L.K.L.



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